

## English Translations of the Bible

A Short Review by Dr P.C.R. Comninos

The General Assembly in 2016 approved this review as a "guide to English Versions of the Bible" by instructing that it be placed on the UPCS website and encouraging Ministers to print copies of the guide (perhaps in church magazines) and so "make it available to their church members".

### Introduction

This is a short guide that seeks to aid congregations and Christians to make an educated choice between the many translations of the Bible into English. It is more practical than academic, but seeks to build on a scholarly foundation.

Dr. Rex Mathie used to say that there are many echoes but few voices. By "voices" he meant scholarly works that create new ground. It is to these works, he said, that the student should resort, not to those that take up and rework, or echo, their ideas. In the world of Bible translations there are many echoes but few voices. What then are the voices?

### The King James Version

The King James Version remains unsurpassed in power and influence. No other translation of the Bible comes close to this timeless masterpiece in terms of sheer beauty and power of language. Sadly, it has fallen out of favour in public worship for three reasons:

- a) its old-style English no longer appeals to some people;
- b) it is no longer up to date in terms of the scholarly work identifying the most reliable texts; and
- c) it is no longer up to date in the accuracy of its translation in places.

However, for devotional and scholarly use the KJV remains useful for the following reasons:

- a) it is still the most consistently literal translation of the Bible in the English language (apart from the Revised Version);
- b) its rhythmic beauty lends itself to easy memorization; and
- c) it conveys something of the dignity and power of the text in the original languages.

The best edition of the KJV currently available is that edited by

Norton.<sup>1</sup>

### The Revised Standard Version

The RSV made its appearance as a complete Bible in 1952. The New Testament underwent minor revisions in 1971, 1972, and 1977. Of the many translations of the Bible, it remains the one that scholarly works most frequently cite. Hated by conservatives at the time of its release, it is now used widely by scholars, Roman Catholic and Orthodox as well as Protestant, and by many ordinary Christians. The RSV served as the base translation for the NRSV and also for the ESV (see below).

The best edition of the RSV is that by May and Metzger.

### The New Revised Standard Version

This is the official revision of the RSV and was first published in 1989. Many scholars regard it as the most literally accurate translation of the Bible. Its translators attempted to exclude male bias in the original text that was retained in the RSV. For the most part the NRSV is a brilliant translation by an array of scholars with impeccable credentials. Let me offer one strength, followed by one criticism.

- a) In terms of strength, the NRSV handles the issue of gender more sensitively and more accurately than all other English translations, in that it renders gender bias only when such is reflected in the original Greek or Hebrew. As an example, it does not translate the Greek address "brothers" as "brothers", because in Greek the term "brother" refers to male and female referents. The translators have consistently asked the question: Is this passage about gender? If not, they have felt at liberty to translate with gender neutral language. A good example is Philippians 2:7-8, where the translators apparently asked themselves: Does the writer here speak about the incarnate Christ as a man (as the KJV and the RSV could be taken to mean) or as a human being? As the Greek uses the term for "human being", not the gender but the humanity of Christ is the point. Hence they rendered the verse as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what many people suppose, the KJV comes in many different editions. Norton's is the best, because faithfully reproduces the first edition.

7 [he] emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born **in human likeness**.  
 And being found in human form...

Compare this with the RSV:

7 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a servant,  
 being born **in the likeness of men**.  
 And being found in human form...

- b) In terms of a weakness, I was surprised to discover that the translation of the title "Son of man" in the NRSV was to some degree motivated by a desire not to offend the sensibilities of some of the translators. One, best left unnamed, threatened to resign from the board of translators if his translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic phrase "son of man" was not rendered as "a human being" (see Dan 7:13) or "mortal" (see Ezek 2:1). Christians will immediately recognize the problem because the phrase was used by Jesus of himself and has important Christological implications. Rendering it a *human being* or *mortal* obscures the connection. This particular translator was *not a Christian*. The question then is: should the translation of passages in the Old Testament that the New Testament takes to refer to the Messiah be decided by non-Christians?

The best edition of the NRSV is the Reference Edition edited by Barton.

### The New English Bible

This extraordinary version of the Bible, published in 1972, was the first completely fresh translation by an ecclesiastical committee since the Bishop's Bible in 1572.<sup>2</sup> That said, the NEB was completed under the main influence of Professor C.H. Dodd, a New Testament scholar whose mind was so sharp that it could cut paper. Those who formed the committee had a qualification that some modern translators lack: they really knew the languages. Many of my Jewish friends regard the translation of

the Old Testament as a triumph. It failed to achieve acceptance because it was just too accurate (and hence offensive in places), stuffy, and contained too many Britishisms that soon passed out of the English language. The translation also betrays Dodd's ecclesiastical roots, which were Congregational and low Church. That aside, the NEB is a masterpiece, especially in the Old Testament.

The Revised English Bible (REB), a revision of the NEB, was published in 1970, and with the Apocrypha in 1989. It is beautiful to read and accurate too. It lacks the boldness of the NEB, generally goes for more conservative renderings and is less eccentric. It is perfectly suited to public reading, but contains many Britishisms that, sadly, offend some ears.

The best edition of the NEB is the Oxford Study Edition.

### The Jerusalem Bible

The Jerusalem Bible is unparalleled in combining depth of scholarship with boldness of rendition. Eccentric and wrong in places, it is utterly brilliant when it gets it right. Few translations of the Bible succeed like this one does in rendering the Bible into modern literate English. The result is a book that reads like English instead of a literal translation of the original Hebrew and Greek. One of the editors in the final stages was no less than J.R. Tolkien, Professor of Mediaeval English at Cambridge. Thankfully too, the English is not grade school, unlike that in many modern translations. It reads like literature, in accordance with the nature of the text itself.

The New Jerusalem Bible (a revision of the Jerusalem Bible), as good as it is, like all revisions of great translations, aims at balance but tips the scales in favour of dullness. In fact, there are so many differences between the original JB and the NJB that they should be regarded as two entirely different translations. Both translations do what they need to do to render the text consistently with Catholic doctrine.

The best edition of the Jerusalem Bible is the Standard Edition.

### The Good News Bible

The Good News Bible, also known as Today's English Version, is one of the best known and most widely used of the Bible

<sup>2</sup> The King James was itself based on the Bishop's Bible and Tyndale's New Testament.

translations that follow the method of dynamic equivalence, the goal of which is to render *the meaning* as opposed to *the words* of Scripture. The idea is to reproduce the biblical text in common spoken English, as opposed to an English style that is literary. The result is that much of the text reads easily, and sounds conversational, even when the original is not conversational but literary. The GNB was one of the first English translations to make use of modern linguistic science, and so its translation is based on thorough linguistic principles. As an example of how highly it is still regarded, one may mention that it is one of four English translations of the Bible that are employed in a new feature in the fifth edition of *The Greek New Testament* (UBS), whose critical apparatus provides the choices the various translations make on key textual variations throughout the New Testament. (The other translations are the NRSV, NIV and REB).

To illustrate some of the principles and translation and textual choices of the GNB I have selected two passages from the Old Testament and one from the New.

Genesis 1:1 in the GNB reads:

In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water.

The translators have been faithful to Hebrew syntax (which allows for the above rendering), but the theological implication of their choice is that Genesis does not teach that God created the world out of nothing; instead at the start of God's creative activity the world already existed but lacked design, form, and light. In addition, one should note the translation "God created *the universe*". The translators have thus rendered the Hebrew phrase "the heavens and the earth" as a hendiadys denoting *everything that exists*. However, this injects into the ancient text the notion of a universe, which is a modern scientific idea. One may also note that the original GNB read "and the power of God was moving over the waters", a reading that was changed in subsequent printings to "and the Spirit of God was moving over the waters". One other example from Genesis may be cited. In Gen 2:22 it says that God "formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him." The translation is misleading because it renders the Hebrew verb in *this* verse as *formed*, whereas the

Hebrew verb for formed is one used in Genesis 2 for God's activity in creating the male, whereas the word *build* is used in relation to the female. God *forms* the man but *builds* the woman. The GNB obscures this and conveys the false impression that the creative process employed by God in the case of the male and the female was the same.<sup>3</sup> As a sampling of a New

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<sup>3</sup> Some other examples from the Old Testament can be provided. In Exodus 20, the fourth commandment is rendered in such a way that only the first part of the command is viewed as an injunction: "Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. You have six days in which to do your work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me." This gives the impression that the fourth commandment consists of the words: *Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy*, and that what follows is merely elaboration. However, in the Hebrew the words that follow are also injunctive, which makes it clear that the fourth commandment comprises two commands, a command to rest and a command to work. One must not work on the Sabbath, but one must work on the other days. The sixth commandment is rendered: "Do not commit murder." Yet in Hebrew the scope of the command is not limited to humans. In the context the verb *rāṣaḥ* means *to kill illegally*. Hence: *Israel must not kill anyone or anything without legality*, which would include animals.

Going further afield, the difficult verse Leviticus 18:22 constitutes the Old Testament case against homosexual behaviour. The GNB translates: "No man is to have sexual relations with another man; God hates that." The Hebrew literally says: "You shall not lie down with a male, the beds of a woman; it is abomination." The translators have drawn an inference about what behaviour is being prohibited, an inference that may be wrong. They have also added the name God into the text and treated the phrase "It is an abomination" as an expression of God's personal feelings.

One area where the GNB has received much praise is its rendering of the Psalms, which come alive, are easily understood, and make for excellent public reading. That said, at times the translators have failed. Psalm 1:1, for example, reads: "Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people, who do not follow the example of sinners or join those who have no use for God. Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the LORD, and they study it day and night." A few brief points may be made here:

- a) The original play on words conveyed by three Hebrew verbs is lost here. The Hebrew has *blessed is the one who does not walk ... stand ... sit*. In an effort to explain the *meaning* of the idioms the translation loses this play on words, and one is left with three English words that are quite different and unrelated: *reject, follow, and join*.
- b) It is questionable whether the Hebrew literally rendered as "the blessedness of ..." should be rendered as *happy*.
- c) The word "obeying" is not found in the original text and gives the passage a legalistic ring that the original lacks. This follows from the translators' idea that they must convey the *meaning* of the original. But here they have imputed to the text a meaning lacking in the original.

Testament translation, I have chosen a small section of text from Hebrews 3. The Greek text of the chapter begins with an important opening adverb ("whence/therefore/and so") that links it to the previous chapter. The GNB omits the word altogether, thus losing the linkage in thought. In the unit the writer addresses his listeners as "holy brothers" which in the GNB becomes "my Christian brothers and sisters". The translators have added the words "my", "Christian" and "and sisters", and more importantly have left out the word "holy". The two titles of Christ which are then set forward by the Greek writer (Jesus as "Apostle" and "High Priest") become in the GNB one title: "Think of Jesus, whom God sent to be the High Priest of the faith we profess." The GNB translators have turned the rare title "Apostle" into an appositional phrase describing what God has done in Jesus. They have taken the phrase "of our confession" to refer to the *act* of confession, or professing, when the Greek refers to *what is confessed*, that is, a confession of faith. In verse 12 the vocative "brothers" is now rendered as "fellow believers". The exhortation to *encourage one another* is translated as *help one another*. The upshot is that the translators have taken great liberty to expand, modify, simplify, and even change the text, when they feel this is licensed by what *they understand the text to mean*.

As far as textual issues are concerned, we can consider a single important example. Mark 16 lacks a resurrection account in our oldest and most reliable textual witnesses. The Codex Vaticanus

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As far as accepted scholarly readings are concerned, the GNB falls in line with conventional scholarship. Isaiah 7:14 renders "a young woman who is pregnant" and not a virgin. The Hebrew noun rendered here as a *young woman* has become a symbol that divides conservative and liberal scholarship. It is generally now taken for granted among "informed" scholars that the noun does not mean *virgin* as it was taken to mean by the LXX and later by the writers of the NT. Modern lexicons hence now give as the noun's meaning a *young woman of marriageable age*. This definition shows the triumph of the interpretation proposed since the Middle Ages by Jewish scholars who have insisted that the correct Hebrew term for virgin is *bēṭûlâ* not *ʾalmâ*. However, a close examination of the texts in question reveals that it is in fact exactly the opposite: *ʾalmâ* is used in Scripture of a young innocent girl, presumably a virgin, while *bēṭûlâ* is used for a young woman of marriageable age. The other occurrences of the noun *ʾalmâ* are in Gen 24:43, Ex 2:8; Ps 68:25, Song of Songs 1:3, 6:8 and Pr 30:19. In each of these texts the young woman referred to is sexually innocent and unaware.

as well as the Codex Sinaiticus end the Gospel at Mark 16:5. Later and less reliable manuscripts add the endings that are found in our English translations, and these endings are not uniform. If one looks at the textual notes in the GNB, one is led to the false impression that while some ancient manuscripts lack Mark 16:9-20, and while some include Mark 15:9-10, all include 16:6-8, which is not only incorrect but misleading.

The best edition of the GNB is the original standard printing which was accompanied by beautiful line drawings by Annie Vallotton. Unfortunately, for copyright reasons, these do not appear in recent printings.

### The New International Version

The NIV was first published in 1978 as an evangelical "answer" to the RSV. Aside from the KJV it is the world's best-selling translation of the Bible. Here are a few salient points:

a) The NIV is a conservative evangelical translation of the Bible and protects at almost every turn evangelical conservative readings of the Bible. One can be sure that if a verse is able to yield a conservative rendering (such as 2 Timothy 3:16), the NIV always renders it that way. From a scholarly point of this raises serious questions about the trustworthiness of the translation, as the probability that the meaning of the text *always* inclines to a conservative interpretation is zero.

b) The NIV is guilty of frequent errors in translation. One example is its consistent rendering of the Greek term *sarx* as "sinful human nature". Another small example is 1 John 4:1-3. In the space of three verses one finds two major mistakes. The NIV renders the Greek "beloved" as "friends". That this is a mistake is shown by the fact that 1 John uses both nouns, "beloved" and "friends", and understands by them two different groups! One might also note the translation of 1 John 4:3: "This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard *is coming* and even now is already in the world." The rendering "is coming" implies that for the writer the coming of antichrist is a definite future event. But this is an error: the Greek requires the English translation "was coming". (The mistake comes from forgetting that in indirect speech Greek, unlike English, preserves the tense of direct speech.)

c) The NIV is published in the USA by Zondervan, and in the UK by Hodder & Stoughton. Zondervan has exclusive rights to its

publication and touts the NIV as the world's most readable and accurate version of the Bible. One must offset these claims against the financial interests of the publishing house for which the NIV is a multi-billion (*sic*) dollar industry!

d) The NIV renders vastly different types of literature into a single English style. The poetry of the Psalms, the narratives of Genesis and the letters of Paul all read alike. The positive side of this is readability. The negative side is that the differences between the individual styles of the biblical writers are altogether lost. (This criticism pertains also to the GNB and the CEV).

A New International Version Inclusive Language Edition was published by H. & S. in England in 1996, but conservative evangelical opposition to this in the USA led Zondervan not to publish it there. In 2005 Today's New International Version (TNIV) was published in the USA as a revised version of the NIV. Conservative evangelicals in the USA strongly opposed this too, mainly because of its gender-neutral language (e.g. in Gen 1:27 and Matt 5:9). The result was that both the TNIV and the earlier NIV were discontinued in 2011, and an updated version of the NIV replaced them.

There are many excellent editions of the NIV. My preference is for the Large Print edition currently available from the Bible Society of SA.

### The Contemporary English Version

The CEV falls into the category of translations that seek to use "meaning for meaning" instead of word for word as the basis of translation. On the whole it succeeds, as it avoids the tendency of similar translations to elaborate where there is no real need to do so. The economic use of the English language is a triumph. I also appreciate the way in which the text has been set out, particularly in passages of poetry.

My criticisms of this translation have more to do with a general reservation about the type of translation than with the CEV in particular. The desire to render the Bible into modern English can lead to a great deal of de-theologizing. Key theological terms like "redemption" and "justification" are rendered by such English phrases as "set free" and "put right". This type of translation has its benefits but often results in oversimplification. At times the translation fails, as in John 3:5: "You must be born not only by

water but by the Spirit." Here the CEV distinguishes birth by the Spirit from birth by water, whereas the Greek holds them together with a single preposition governing the whole phrase.

Despite these misgivings, I am pleased to have been introduced to the CEV. I have tried it out, and it sounds good when read aloud. Take note of the translation of Deut 6.20-25, where the parent's language to his child is rendered in a childlike manner. Also Luke 8, where Legion is translated as "Lot" because there are "lots" of us.

### The Holman Christian Study Bible

The HCSB is notable for a number of reasons:

- a) Most translations on the market today are revisions of translations, like the ESV, RSV, NRSV, NKJV, NLT and REB. Even the NIV, which claims to be a new translation, is greatly dependent on the language of the RSV and KJV. The HCSB, however, is a completely fresh translation of the Bible. (The previous completely "fresh" translation of the Bible was the New English Bible.)
- b) The HCSB, despite its independence, actually harks back to the KJV in its *method*, even though not in its language. The KJV was mostly a literal translation of the Bible, but not slavishly so. The HCSB is literal where it can be, but not to the detriment of intelligibility. When it translates phrases in a non-literal way, it is always careful not to go beyond what the text means; one will not find expansive interpretations here.
- c) The Holman tries to translate into English that people can understand and succeeds. This does not mean "kitchen English" but good, literate English that we use today. A good example is the word "scribe", which the HCSB sometimes renders as "a student of Scripture" (e.g. Matt 13.52).
- d) The HCSB took twenty years to make. It has been produced with great care and has taken advantage of the latest computer technology, in order to use the same words consistently. Many of the scholars who worked on this project were also involved in the New American Standard Bible (NASB). The same dedication to accuracy and care that one finds in the NASB comes through in the HCSB, although

with the HCSB the approach and methodology, and hence the translation, are different.

- e) The HCSB is not afraid to render familiar biblical texts in a different way. For example, John 3:16 reads differently, but more accurately: "For God loved the world in this way..." Older translations render "For God so loved...", suggesting that the text is about the *extent* of God's love, whereas the Greek word *houtōs* strictly means not *how much* but *how* God loves. Another example is Psalm 23:3: "He leads me along the right paths for His name's sake." Here "right paths" is a more accurate rendering than the traditional "in the paths of righteousness".

### The English Standard Version

The ESV is a conservative evangelical revision of the RSV. In order to determine its accuracy I read carefully through its translation of the Psalms, comparing it at key points with the RSV on which it is based. Surprisingly, at several points the ESV renders the Psalms in a way which is inferior to that of the RSV; that is, the ESV often changes the RSV for the worse, not the better. Examples in Psalms 1-50 are: Psalm 1:4; 2:12; 3:6; 9:13; 9:15; 11:4; 12:1; 16:6; 16:9; 17:8; 17:11, 19:3; 22:19; 25:13; 26:12; 31:20; 35:8; 35:12; 35:15; 36:3; 37:3; 37:10; 40:4; 40:11; 42:5; 43:2; 45:2; 49:13; 50:18. In each of these instances the translators of the ESV have made a deliberate change to the RSV, but in my opinion with an inferior result. The readings are either unintelligible grammatically or else they are just not as accurate. As an example take Psalm 17:11, which reads in the ESV: "They have now surrounded our steps; they set their eyes to cast us to the ground." In the RSV this reads: "They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground." One would like to ask with regard the ESV translation: how is it possible to surround people's steps? The translation has been changed and now makes no sense. On the positive side, the ESV restores many KJV readings with success. Examples are Ps 22:9; 23:4; 24:6; 28:2; 30:7; 31:6; 38:5; 38:9; 38:17, 19, 46.2, 3, 5, 10; 49:11, 12, 20; 50:20-23.

### The New Century Version, The New Living Translation, The Message

I have grouped these translations together because they all try to render the text in a way that is easy to understand. In this respect they all succeed. The last mentioned, *The Message*, is more of a paraphrase than a translation and should be used with great care, because the translator habitually compromises accuracy for creativity. One might ask: "Of what use is a text that is easy to read, if the text in question has not been accurately rendered?" In that case, one is reading nothing more than easily understood nonsense.

Of the three translations here mentioned *The New Century Version* has the most to recommend it. It is accurate, dignified and reads easily without sounding childish. The editors go out of their way to render terms that are technical in the original as non-technical terms. For example, "antichrist" is rendered as "the enemy of Christ" (1 John 4:3), "atonement" as "to die in our place" (Rom 3:25), justification as "to make us right with God" (Rom 4:25), sanctification as "living only for God" (Rom 6:19). Aside from the question of the accuracy of these renderings, the loss of technical terms is also a loss for the preacher who can use these terms as a starting point in teaching and exposition. Translations like this should be used only as secondary versions, to illustrate the main version one uses.

### The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore

I have included this lesser-known work because it deserves special mention. It is one of the few translations produced by a scholar of classics, and not a biblical scholar. (Another example is the earlier work by E.V. Rieu.)

In the world of classical Greek Lattimore holds a special place. Before his death he was the foremost translator of the Greek classics. His translation of *The Iliad* is a masterpiece and was followed by equally impressive renderings of Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus. He came to the New Testament, then, with all the expertise necessary for rendering Greek. His style of translation is literal, for Lattimore believed that was the best way of rendering texts, as it allowed for the individual style of the writer to shine through even in translation. The strengths of this work include atypical renderings that bypass the Tyndale-King-James

tradition of English translation. Lattimore also had a special ability in rendering Greek verbs, in that he was able to discern subtle shades in meaning lost in other translations. For example, the Greek verb *apokrinomai* is usually rendered *I answer*. However, it often appears in the text without any preceding question, which makes the English translation *he answered* odd. Lattimore in these instances translates correctly as *he spoke forth*. I also find rare genius in his rendering of Greek verbs of motion and thinking, many of which carry special nuances. A weakness is the fact that verse numbers are not provided in the text. This was Lattimore's intention, as he wanted the text to be read with as few interruptions as possible. It is, however, frustrating for those who use this as a reference work. In conclusion, this is a noteworthy rendition of the Greek, and in my view, the finest translation of the New Testament by an individual (other than Tyndale!).

### A Recommendation

I have no doubt that churches and individuals will each have their "favourite" translation, based on use and recommendation. One must, however, learn (as part of a discipline and exercise in truthfulness) that because a translation is the one we are used to or yields readings we prefer, that says little of its accuracy.

For my part, of the versions surveyed above, the *New Revised Standard Version* remains the best modern translation overall for use in the Church. The reasons are as follows:

- a) The scholars who produced the NRSV were/are among the finest in the world.
- b) The version does not reflect any religious lobby.
- c) The language is literal, modern and dignified.
- d) The language is more thoroughly gender inclusive than its rivals without significant loss to the meaning of the text.
- e) The version is well suited for both private and public use.
- f) The PCUSA Service Book Team has used mainly the NRSV for its Orders of service, which in effect makes it the official version of the UPCS.
- g) The translation is one that can be wholly trusted.

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